

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

## Episode 57: Jonathan Bush

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Jonathan Bush. Founder and CEO of AthenaHealth.

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Whitney: All right. So when you graduated from college, what was the plan?

Jonathan: I wanted to be a future enterpriser just like in *Risky Business*. You know, I wanted to get out there and make a big difference. I had taken the job search process more seriously than anything else. I wanted to be a leader of something. I had started my job search, uh, with the hope of becoming kind of a bag carrier for a CEO. When my uncle had been president and vice president or somewhere in there ...

Whitney: Okay, so who was your uncle?

Jonathan: George Bush, H.W. Bush.

Whitney: Okay. Just- just in case no one picked up on that.

Jonathan: Like Dylan, you know, I like the old stuff better.

Whitney: Okay, okay.

Jonathan: No, just kidding. Uh, the, uh ... H.W. Bush, I had worked on his presidential campaign. One of my reasons for a six-year college period was I took a year off to work on the 1988 Bush campaign. And there was this guy, Tim McBride, who followed Mr. Bush around, Vice President Bush around. Seemed to arrange minor things, things that I imagined myself handling, but there he was at this summit and there he was in this cabinet meeting. You know, there he was, uh, you know, fly fishing with the President in the Rockies with the Parks Secretary or whatever.

And, uh, I thought, "That's gonna be me, but I want to do it in something in- in the market." You know? And, uh, maybe, uh ... And I wanted to be in health care. I'd been an EMT and I worked in the Army in the Medical Corps. I thought health care was an area that was, you know, doing good, but you could do well. So I ... That's how I started my job search, and then- and then, uh, in the course of that ended up in a kind of a startup health care facing group. Uh, and- uh, at Booz Allen and Hamilton.

Whitney: How did you decide that you wanted to be an EMT in New Orleans?

Jonathan: Well ...

Whitney: That's interesting.

Jonathan: I thought I wanted to be a doctor. Uh, and a doctor friend, someone who had ... actually was one of the White House trauma surgeons that, you know, fly around the world and, uh, on the off chance that the president is injured they're- they're there. He said, "Well, try before you buy, uh, Johnny Bush, because you aren't, uh, a very good student. You know, you're a very exciting guy and I like you a lot, but, uh, there's this thing called organic chemistry, uh, which you could probably get through, but you will not like it."

And, uh, so, um, you know, my- my medical corps had us training in New Orleans, which has an inordinate number of shootings so we could practice. "And I know the police surgeon. You should go try to get a job." So I ended up, in order to pursue being a physician, uh, getting a job filling in for the maternity leave of one of the city's paramedics. Uh, and quickly realized that, uh- uh, I did not want to be a- a doctor. I did not want to go through medical school for seven years and fellowship, et cetera. Not because of the organic chemistry, which would've been really rough on me. Uh, but because, uh, the end game is highly conscribed.

So as an EMT, you know, you show up and a thousand things can be wrong with someone. But there's only about 20 things that you can do. You know, you give 'em oxygen. You can put a tube down their throat. You can put a bandage on 'em. You know? There's about 30 things that represent 95% of the things you do for someone. Uh, when you get to the, uh, emergency room there's an attending and there's probably 100 things that that guy or girl could do. And, uh, and I thought just for a year that'd be great, and two that'd be fine, and after 20 I think I'd want to shoot myself.

Uh, so I wanted something that would be more varied. What my doctor friend said, "Oh, well you can get into academia and write textbooks and do research." This felt very, uh, not my str- strong suit.

Whitney: All right. So let's back up a little bit. You are- you're an EMT in New Orleans. You realize you don't want to be a doctor. I'm actually surprised that you thought you wanted to be a doctor in the first place.

Jonathan: Well, the- the doctor is more of a competitive landscape for good-doing in the Bush family. I- I wrongly believed as a child that love in the Bush family, uh, came from acts of good work. And that you would only be lovable in proportion to your good works. So Uncle George was the most lovable and then all of the other siblings, you know, were able to obtain, uh- uh- uh, slough off love in proportion to their ... My dad was the chairman of the United Negro College Fund and he was on the board of, uh- uh ... you know, was a coach at the Big Brothers ... I mean at the Boys' Club in New York. And, you know ...

And these things I- I had in my mind as a little boy looking up, uh ...

Whitney: So- wait, let me just say that again 'cause that's fascinating.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: Every-

Jonathan: Remember I said wrongly ... I- I- I think in- in retrospect they would- they would've loved me no matter what, but ...

Whitney: Right. But every child believes or most children believe ...

Jonathan: Right. It is the work of the child ...

Whitney: ... or have some idea, "How do I get-

Jonathan: ... to game out how to get love ...

Whitney: Right.

Jonathan: ... so they'll get fed and held ...

Whitney: Exactly.

Jonathan: ... and picked up when the- when the wolves come to be carried out of the camp.

Whitney: Right.

Jonathan: Right. Exactly. So as I looked up in the Bush family, uh, love was in proportion, uh, to good works.

Whitney: So you were gonna be a doctor.

Jonathan: So I thought doctor. First of all, there's no one else in the Bush family except for Uncle Johnny who's got polio, uh, that is a doctor. So I'll be the best doctor in the Bush family no matter how bad a job I do. Uh, and, uh, I could imagine ... You know, I went to a private school and had a really comfortable life. I wanted to be able to give children some kind of great education like mine. And, uh, figured doctors could do that. Uh, but I had also imagined myself, you know, saving lives like the ... like Hawkeye on- on MASH.

Whitney: MASH. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan: And, uh, so that's how I got it in my head.

Whitney: And- and truth be told, you probably would have enjoyed being a Hawkeye.

Jonathan: Sure.

Whitney: So how did you end up at Desert Storm and- and what was that experience like for you?

Jonathan: Like a lot of, uh, experiences that are high and low reasoning. So if it's war, you know, love is- is- is going to be available to me in proportion to my good works. My uncle is

being, uh, accused of sending the, uh, American, you know, black man shoot the, uh- uh, brown man in the name of the white man's will. That was literally a quote from CNN one night when I was at college. Uh, I had these skills. I had treated at that point dozens of gunshot wounds, and felt confident at it. And I had a big term paper due. And so I could, uh, both avoid the term paper ... And what a great excuse. You know, sorry there was a war. Not my dog ate it. There was a freaking war.

Whitney: (Laughs)

Jonathan: Um, and, uh, so I felt like I could help with the war. I felt like I could help my uncle's political positioning. Uh, and I felt like I could put off that paper.

Whitney: So you quit school.

Jonathan: Uh, took a year off. Took another gap year. And I had an extraordinary experience. No war. No, the war was over in 11 minutes. Boot camp alone was eight weeks and then you have to go to AIT, which is another 10 weeks. And it took me a few weeks to start and so by the time I was out and ready for action in my- in my desert BDUs it was over and people were shipping back.

But I learned more about leadership because I hadn't graduated from college. I didn't go to officer candidate school. I was an enlisted guy. I was a private first class. And, uh, you know, I had a guy who was a Crip. I had a- a Dallas police officer who was, uh, suspected of, uh, of violence on a, uh ... on a person in a domestic violence call that he called into. Basically beat the crap out of a, uh- of a man for beating up his wife. And rather than face the elaborate, uh, review process he decided it'd be a good time for him to get out of town and join the Army. Uh, I had the son of the sergeant for the night shift of the Atlanta city jail. I had a guy who was living out of a- a dumpster, a McDonald's dumpster. I had a guy named Willis who had never left his farm, never left the land of his farm. Uh, and he said, and I quote, but, "I can shoot the tick turd off a deer at 50 yards."

So what an experience.

Whitney: Yeah.

Jonathan: Um, I was made a squad leader, which is sort of like the Army's version of the student council. It's not a real thing ... And then eventually platoon leader. And your job was to make sure everybody got dressed, put away their clothes, made their bed, showed up on time and knew the basics. And when I say basics I mean like you tie your shoes like this ...

Whitney: Right.

Jonathan: ... and then you tuck the laces in. Uh, and so the ability to, uh, manage without titular authority, to lead without force, which I have found to be incredibly important, came pretty much exclusively from my time in the U.S. Army.

Whitney: So you talked a lot about your uncle being criticized. What's that like when you have someone that you love and you admire that's so in the public eye to be vilified?

Jonathan: Well, you grow used to it for sure, but it really hurts. And I think that hurt motivated me to, uh, make- become a lot less shy and much more of an extrovert than I was because I wanted to reverse it. You know, I wanted to show people. And I just felt like ... And I think a lot of people who worked particularly with H.W. Bush, who were close to him and felt like if everybody could've met him, uh, you know, he would've won in a landslide. But instead he had to work through indirect means, media...

Whitney: So you were shy?

Jonathan: I was a very shy, uh, child. Yeah.

Whitney: Were you ...

Jonathan: All the way through high school.

Whitney: Were you a class clown even when you were shy? Cause you're ...

Jonathan: I did acting.

Whitney: ... You have a clows ... class clown persona.

Jonathan: I got to clown. My clowning was, uh, in when I could hide. In general everything I am at my biggest I'm hiding behind some duty, some official permission. So I could be a bad boy, loud, brash, uh, CEO if I can convince myself that the duties of a CEO call for it. Uh, and I could be a clown and funny in high school or grade school if I was in a play and playing the part of the clown. And, uh, and then when I wasn't I was too shy.

And so, again, probably from the Bush thing. Like if you're on duty everybody's behind you.

Whitney: Yeah.

Jonathan: Uh, and if you're just being you, uh ... So the whole millennial movement I suck at. Like, you know, "I really want to be present." Like I don't. I just want to be service.

Whitney: Yeah.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: Yeah. And then the question comes, "Who's you?"

Jonathan: And that is a huge issue for me. I think I've turned 40 so I get to just accept at this point and stop trying to re-engineer. But it may just be that I am a set of principles. Uh, you know, and- and then all the hurts and joys around them. But certainly, uh, you ask

members of my team, I'll go traveling around the country meeting customers or prospects. And I will, like Zelig, that movie, the- the Woody Allen movie, I will begin to talk ... I will begin to become the people I am with unconsciously. I'll suddenly have a Nashville accent or whatever. I don't even mean to.

Whitney: So you're deeply empathic.

Jonathan: I am- I am ... For, uh- uh- I ... My J is almost gone. I am very empathic, uh, at this point.

Whitney: So when other people hurt you hurt.

Jonathan: Oh, God yeah. Yeah. Especially ... When individuals hurt, I hurt almost unbearably, but large groups of people hurt in the name of a cause doesn't bother me at all. It bothers me very little. So-

Whitney: But when you say the individual hurts ...

Jonathan: Yeah. Knowing someone and knowing that they, you know, that they have become ill or that they're gonna lose their job or that they're ... You know, out of alignment with what's happening around them and the pain of watching them be out of touch. Those things hurt a lot. Um ...

Whitney: How do you manage that being a CEO? Because there are times ...

Jonathan: Typ ... I'm a very bad manager and a pretty okay leader, so I get a lot of help managing my direct team. And then those teams have big teams. And so by the time you get outside of my little office area I'm dealing in large numbers and it doesn't bother me. I can look at a group of men I just had to shake hands with 135 people here and- and let 'em go. And, uh, it was- it was ... I mean it wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't bad because I knew that it was necessary for the 'cause and I could say that to them with a lot of conviction.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan: I hadn't taken it lightly. Um, and it wasn't personal.

Whitney: Right.

Jonathan: They knew it. 'Cause it was just ... Well, they were in a huge room full of people who are getting laid off.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan: So that didn't hurt. My problem is when it becomes more personal.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan: And my biggest liability as a leader by far is ... Strength and ... I guess strength and weakness, right?

Whitney: Yeah.

Jonathan: Uh, is loyalty. Uh, if someone does a bad job I let 'em fail. I don't micromanage. But I'll keep backing 'em up (laughs) when I shoulda shot 'em a long time ago.

Whitney: Even when you shoulda let 'em go.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: Let's go to now you're the CEO of a technology company. Um, you've been ... You've received numerous awards. You've been the, you know, disruptor, 2013 CEO of the year, Massachusetts Technology Leadership Council. Fortune, 35 Leaders Changing Healthcare.

So let's talk a little bit about how you got the idea for this company.

Jonathan: Accident, right? I mean the- the goal was that, uh, medicine was despite its noble purpose, um, kind of inhumane and expensive. Initially it was women's health, and my wife was studying to be a mid-wife and she could intern in the mid-wife office. And she's like, "You can't believe. Everybody gets treated like they're, uh- you know, like they're in the Matrix. They get plugged into these things and they're fine. And, uh, you know, no one listens to the mid-wives."

And everywhere else in the world, you know, have lower cost, better maternity, uh, success rates. And, uh- uh, and just a, you know, much more lovely experience. You know, "You should build a business doing this. We should start a birth center." And, uh, I wanted to do something with her, so we could be more time together. And so that's how we got into it. And of course what we found ... And original intent was ... We had put too much in our project. We had gone too deep with too little assets, too little uniqueness. Um, so the business ended up much narrower, but with a lot of assets and a lot of uniqueness.

But, that, uh ... It started with the same basic ... It's remained the same basic premise, that healthcare is too expensive, and that's not even the worse part. The worst part is that for all that money it's not an expression of our humanity because of all of these ridiculous frictions. To our millennial employees I said the microaggressions against medicine. That's what we're here to do. We're here to crush the microaggressions.

I mean medicine fundamentally is an accumulation of the unintended adverse consequences of years and years and years of well-intended regulations and constrictions. Um, so that's how it got going. Um, to the awards, I'm not a fan of the awards. I'm only interested in awards if it'll get us some PR frankly.

Whitney: Right. Get you what you need to-

Jonathan: Uh, get name ID up. But, the act of- of being in the fight is what's, uh, much more gratifying. And the knowledge. Really no matter how hard you are in your thinking if you believe that the fight you're in is the gateway to a much bigger fight, that you're always at the tip of a much bigger, uh, mountain range or the entrance of a bigger mountain range. That's to me what gives me great joy, uh, and satisfaction is that we keep finding whole new frontiers.

Um, I've never gotten any satisfaction from, um, an accomplishment. Which, by the way, some of my employees can't stand about me.

Whitney: Well, you know, it's interesting that you say that. I- I remember one of the things that really intrigued me about you when I first, um ... When, you know, we were at the dis- I was at the Disruptive Innovation Fund and we had invested in Athena. And I remember coming to an investor day and listening to you talk. And prior to this life I had been an equity analyst on Wall Street. And so, you know, always, "What's your number for the quarter? Are you gonna beat it? Are you gonna miss it?" And I remember being so, um, entranced is probably the right word, of how you were just, you know, "Directionally, here's where we're going, but if we miss it a little bit or we don't, then- then I'm okay with that." And let the, you know, sort of ... let the stock do what it does. And that was fascinating to me.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: Let's go back to this idea of how did you go from a women's birth center to Athena Health? And talk just a little bit about what it is today for our listeners who aren't familiar with your company.

Jonathan: So, uh, Athena Health today, uh, is an information backbone service, uh, for medicine. So it is ... performs all of the tasks that aren't the actual practice of medicine, uh, in and around, uh, medicine. So everything between the patient and the doctor, between the doctor and the insurance company, between the doctor and the hospital, hospital and the insurance company. All of those frictional spaces. So I have a series of internet-based services that basically give providers, hospitals and doctors, software in the cloud, uh, that they can use as long as they'll let us do their frictional work, the medical records management, the revenue cycle management, the patient communications management, the care coordination. All of those things are services that we provide.

A little bit like the early Sabre system in the airline business. Um, and just like the Sabre system we- we open our ... Today, you know, we opened our API so that other people can put Kayak and other things on top. Um, we don't want to be the only electronic medical records software. We want to be the only, uh, electronic medical record coordination service if you will. And we'd love it if lots of people used our electronic medical record as well.

Whitney: So how did you go from- from-

Jonathan: Uh, we ran, uh- uh, a women's health ... A really brilliant, well-performing, clinically well-performing women's health clinic into the ground. Uh, and luckily for us we ran it into the ground slowly enough that we could be aware of why we were running it into the ground and do enough about it so that by the time the plane hit the trees there was something else there. Uh, and we literally turned our first two birth centers into our first two customers, turned that into five letters of intent with other OBGYN practices and a term sheet from three VCs, uh, just in time.

Literally the morning our VC capital flowed into Athena there was, uh, \$623 in the bank, and in the afternoon there was \$11,000,623 in the bank. Um, so it was a very lucky ... Like a lot of, you know, businesses.

Whitney: Are you surprised you're an entrepreneur?

Jonathan: No. I was an entrepreneur, uh ... An entrepreneur is someone who doesn't want to compete with everybody else. That's just all the below average people you know, uh, as long as they have enough Napoleon complex fueling them along. Right? You- you- you, uh- you will find us in boardrooms and jailhouses all over the world. Uh, we- we want to be loved and unique and- and- and in the flow, um, and we're not athletes or students. You know, or whatever the excellent sheep standards are for our society today. Uh, and so we poke around looking for another pasture to eat in, um, that isn't, you know, best grades, Princeton, you know, sports team, beautiful, whatever.

Whitney: How would you describe your leadership style?

Jonathan: Authoritative aspirational. So I focus ... I'm at my best when I am making an unbelievably compelling case for what's possible around the corner. Um, that's at my be ... And- and- and then I've got a lot of, you know, small businessman tricks that I learned from my dad who was a small businessman his whole career and sort of scooted above- scooted above the tips of the trees. Uh ...

Whitney: So your dad was an entrepreneur.

Jonathan: Sort of. Yeah. I mean he ran an investment management firm. Uh, it was one of the Fortune 20 thousand.

Whitney: (Laughs)

Jonathan: I think his revenues were about two and a half million a year, but he was able to keep enough of that to put us both, my brother and I, through college. Um, and he was a charming ... He was a song and dance man on Broadway. And when his performance wasn't good, his conversations and lunches with his customers were great. And, uh, you know, he kinda rode it. Uh, and I learned a little bit about being tight and cheap and charming. You know, making things go a little further, uh, and getting the best out of people when you can't really afford 'em from him.

I'm aspirational. I mean what I can do is say, "Look, I can ... We're gonna catch the car. You and me, we dogs, we're gonna catch that car."

Whitney: But that's inspirational. Okay, so let-

Jonathan: For some dogs.

Whitney: Let me ask you this question.

Jonathan: For other dogs, you know, "Hey, let's lie around and lick." You know.

Whitney: Do you remember the first time that you realized that you were able to galvanize people?

Jonathan: Yes. I remember it exactly.

It was the George Bush campaign in 1988, and I had been relegated to, um, driving around and collecting cardboard for the lawn signs and, uh, getting pieces of stick, wood from the mills around New Hampshire, uh, to, uh- to make lawn signs. And as the campaign came down ... We had lost the, uh, Iowa caucuses. We actually had come in third. Um, Pat Robertson had smoked it. Although I think a couple may have ... may or may not have voted in more than one caucus for Pat Robertson. Uh, but then Bob Dole had beaten us as well, so we were down 18 points in that.

So the media went ... We were over in the news. But we had done a lot of groundwork. And I had gone ... I had given speeches in I think every single high school in the state. Uh, some colleges, but every social studies class. Every social studies teacher had gotten a call from me. "I'd love to talk about the political process. I'm related to one of the candidates." And collected up volunteers.

And when it came down to it in that final week or whatever these buses from all the volunteers that had ever signed up for George Bush on any of the call-ins or mail-ins, maybe a website. I'm not sure. Uh, not much of a website in 1988. Uh, started showing up in buses. And we had, uh ... A local developer had a housing development that no one had moved into yet, so it's just rugs and floors, and people came with sleeping bags. And I climbed on top of a pile of my wooden slats that I had been collecting and said, "Okay, here's how it's gonna go. My name is Jonathan Bush, and we in the next four days are gonna win this election."

And I had my little group of tiger teams and there were several hundred people. And I'll never forget, um ... I wasn't aware of this at the time. But I went to the White House after he had won, after all this had happened, and, uh, Andy Card ... I think he was deputy chief of staff or some important guy. He had a real office in the White House. This was the guy who had been running the New Hampshire campaign. We had shared the, you know, the bathroom with the- where you put the hose in the bath and it goes up and it becomes a shower and you've got the round curtain. "Morning, sorry. After you sir." You know, before we put on our red ties.

Uh, and, uh- and he said, "You know? You're- you're why we're here." I said, "Oh, that's nice." He said, "No- no- no- no. Do you remember the night?" And he convinced ... he proceeded to convince me dispassionately that- that that had been a sem- a seminal event. And, uh, later on, um, Uncle George ... I don't remember how he got in touch, but when the White House calls it's like a pretty cool thing. And he said, "You know, did you talk to Andy?" And "I heard you talk to Andy. It's all true, Johnny. It's absolutely true. And I want you to come to Camp David any time you want. Are you- are you dating anyone?" And I said, "Well, no, but I know who I want to date." He said, "Well, I bet you Camp David can't hurt."

Whitney: (Laughs)

Jonathan: And sure enough I invited Susanne Furlick on a picnic ... Way up out of my weight class. And we dated for a year more. And one of the most lovely experiences of my life.

I had given at that point 395 speeches about George Bush and the campaign and why it mattered. No one cared. No one would've let me give a speech if it was a real speech. But because it was high school social studies classes and assemblies just to get volunteers to cut up these wood sticks. Uh, and they were terrible signs. I mean because I was ... The guy I got the materials was a milk carton magnate of, uh- of the milk magnate of New Hampshire. I forgot his name. But all the cardboard I got was these long slats that were folded by machines into, you know, half gallon or quart milk.

And so the only we could make a lawn sign was we just printed B-U-S-H up and down, horizontally. And when we planted 'em, it snowed and all it said was Bus. And they were along the road (laughs) so it looked like bus stops. I mean I did everything wrong. But I had been allowed a little bit like Gladwell to have my 10 thousand hours of speech giving, and then it mattered all of a sudden and I was on top of this pile of sticks that I had created. I had been arrested for driving a dump truck that was out of my weight class. You know, or my license didn't allow. I mean I had gone through a lot and it was all visible on my face. And, uh, it worked. So that's when.

And then I said, "Wow. I could ... You know, the key is I gotta find things I care enough about. I gotta have a title or a role that I can hide behind and I can keep doing this."

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative). When are you gonna stop hiding?

Jonathan: Well, uh, maybe I just did a little right here. I mean I think awareness is half the battle in hiding. And, uh, we all kind of get to mid-life and start to accept the unbearable, the previously unbearable to accept. So maybe it's coming. Maybe it's happening. Maybe it's creeping along right now.

Whitney: Developmentally it does- it does start to ...

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: Do you read leadership literature?

Jonathan: No! Sorry.

Whitney: Why do you say that?

Jonathan: I don't know. I've never really found any of it that compelling.

Whitney: What do you read? Well, you read Clay though.

Jonathan: Ah, I did. But I did what everyone does. Don't tell Clay. We read the first chapter of the next book ...

Whitney: (Laughs)

Jonathan: And you get the whole other book. So I never read the first one. I just could go on from there.

Whitney: You just read [Innovator's Dilemma](#).

Jonathan: First ... Yeah. Right, right. I wrote ... You know, I've read three chapters of Clay, but I could- can give a sp ... and have ... Can give speeches on Clay.

Whitney: I've heard those speeches.

Jonathan: I have key aspects of Clay wrong and Clay has even admitted to going back and reviewing the framework because I kept insisting that I fit it even though I technically didn't. So yeah. No. Uh, I- I think I ... You know, I read Shakespeare and I read fiction.

Whitney: What's your favorite Shakespearian play?

Jonathan: Oh, [Henry V](#). Henry V. Not just for the great leadership at the end, but for the painful coming of age in the beginning where he's just a loud spoiled brat that went to private school and he's gotta somehow make himself into something that, you know, Essex would follow. And letting go of his- of his buds and his- his sort of hometown comforts. Um, I wasn't a playboy as a kid, but I have had that experience of, you know, "I gotta decide if I want to do this."

And, uh- and the notion of going up against overwhelming odds and giving people, uh, the joy of the fight over any hope of winning. Uh, a little bit like why we didn't like the awards. All of those great. Henry V. But I love 'em all. I mean I was in The Tempest. I was in Twelfth Night.

Whitney: Is there a team that you have seen or worked with that you feel like functioned really, really effectively?

Jonathan: Oh, so many. Yeah. I should say most of my team success experience is, uh, more of a war time success than a peace time success - meaning there is some specific existential challenge, threat, both ... Threat or threat reward and we rally. Um, we're in trouble.

We're not gonna make cashflow and we figure it out. We have an activist. They've got some good points. We get through our defensiveness and take it seriously and act.

Whitney: Is that where-

Jonathan: The government shows up out of the blue with a fakakta scheme to make everybody buy an EMR. We try to make 'em stop. They don't stop. We become the number one compliant company, uh, in the, uh ... in the country against that program.

Whitney: Where are you right now?

Jonathan: We're in conversion to something that I have not succeeded at as much, and frankly I- I personally ... I'm not in charge of my job, but if I was I would say, uh, my job's hanging in the balance, which is, um, to perform well in peace time. In other words to convert to more of an agile scrum culture where you have lots of bottoms up ownership of innovation. And the commander, you know, is not Jean-Luc Picard, all-knowing, you know, with all of these people kind of around him giving him key information. Uh, but it's a lot a bic ... Who else was on the star ship Enterprise anyway? How come we didn't see them?

You know, what we want to build is one where the, you know, Jean-Luc Picard has very little to do, uh, with those battles and they're won, uh, you know, in- on the decks and in the villages by people who are close to the problem.

Whitney: Is there a Shakespearian play for that?

Jonathan: No. And this is the great irony, right? If you look at Joseph Campbell and all the hero stories, they're all about those inflection points where it's about the, uh ... where it's about the, uh ... it's about the leader.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: So here's my challenge to you. Um, you love literature. Find a great work of fiction that models for you what you're trying to do now.

Jonathan: Uh It's - it's a really interesting, uh, thing. Is it ... And- and why it's interesting to me is if it's fiction it's got a certain candy, you know, sugar high edge to it. I mean I could give lots of examples in non-fiction. But what's great, the fundamental American experience is about, you know, sort of Bourgeois and below, taking away from the king, it's the greatest case study of what we're talking about in the world. And if you look at what corporate America's doing, which is sort of rotting out while we work in micro-businesses like yours and others kind of fill in the space ...

Whitney: Right.

Jonathan: Uh, it's happening and it's beautiful. Um, but is there a beautiful, uh, you know, painting of it all that makes it romantic? Or is it just what's great? I mean you've got things like, um, you know ... What was the movie? Working Girl.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan: You know, and you get that Let the River Run, that Carly Simon song as she's commuting home and ...

Whitney: I- I personally loved that movie because that was my life. I went to Wall Street as a secretary.

Jonathan: Wow.

Whitney: My hair wasn't quite that big.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: But, um, yeah. That was- that was me.

Jonathan: Yeah. Well, there it is. Now, the problem with that one is our heroine ends up in more of that top down executive role.

Whitney: Right. It's not ...

Jonathan: What you really want is where it, you know, breaks across, uh ... And one of the struggles they had making that movie ... Harrison Ford actually came to Booz Allen and Hamilton. Originally it was gonna be a consulting firm. And he's like, "I can't do it. It's just too boring." (Laughs)

Whitney: Interesting.

Jonathan: Uh ...

Whitney: Interesting.

Jonathan: So it had to be a guy in charge of the deal.

Whitney: Yeah.

Jonathan: You know, it had to be a Jean-Luc Picard, uh, setting. Um, so, uh, you know, and this is why we over-rotate on a central government. There is something romantic and vivid about a single leader that you get to talk about and write about if you're a reporter. It's easier to write about what one all-powerful ...

Whitney: Absolutely.

Jonathan: ... gun protected, chopper flying icon did than what thousands and thousands and thousands of regular old little people did, who are vastly more important and relevant than the icon.

Whitney: So, as we wrap up I- I would say that would be my challenge to you, my dare to you actually, is to do- do a search for- for a great ... Because clearly literature inspires you deeply.

Jonathan: Yeah.

Whitney: Last question for you. When you're feeling stuck what do you do to get unstuck?

Jonathan: Well, first of all I procrastinate a lot when I'm stuck.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan: So I don't get unstuck right away. I- I ... There are so many things you could do when you're a CEO.

Whitney: Absolutely.

Jonathan: There's so many who want to see you. And all of them are nominally useful.

Whitney: You could come do a podcast interview for example.

Jonathan: Could do a podcast. I could make some calls. I could ... You know, I could talk to customers or prospects. There's always something to do. But there's not always the real important, most important thing. Invariably what happens to me is I do a lot of the other things in order to feel busy and important, uh, until finally it's getting ... it's gonna rain down on me. And then I have to get alone. I- I have to ...

Whitney: 'Cause you like crisis.

Jonathan: Yeah. And so I give myself a crisis alone, and something horrible comes out. But, you know, then I have to show up at work and so I sheepishly dump this turd, you know, on my chief of staff or on someone who's in charge of it and then we can ... at least it's broken the back of the denial and then we can work on it together.

Whitney: So you get unstuck by procrastinating so long that you create a crisis.

Jonathan: That I'm in so much pain that I actually have to go alone and hate myself, uh, for a little bit.

Whitney: Thank you Jonathan. I really appreciate you taking the time.

Jonathan: Well, I'm glad we made our mics work and, uh, and we got to do this. You are really good at these and I love listening to your podcast.

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There's so much here...

Jonathan is visionary, complicated, charming, and disarmingly introspective. As Jeanette Walls, wrote, "Everyone that is interesting has a past."

Think about his ideas on how children size up how to get loved. Especially within the context of a family that has been so prominent on the world stage. I wonder too how this sizing up plays out at work. My sense is that if people feel loved, they will spend less time gaming the system, and more time getting stuff done.

I enjoyed hearing about Jonathan's involvement in George H.W. Bush's presidential campaign. That moment when he first realized he had something. That – "Hmmm...there might be more to me than I thought." If you haven't had that moment yet, it will come. If you have, remember it. Reflect on it.

And, speaking of all the world's a stage, I was not expecting a healthcare CEO to share leadership lessons from Shakespeare. Nor that he would be suggesting we need a new leadership model. When he said that, the first book I thought of was [The Country Bunny and The Little Gold Shoes](#) by DuBose Heyward. It's a children's book. But there are some great leadership lessons. And the author Jonathan was referring to was Wendell Berry—he's a novelist, cultural critic and farmer. Who by the way, I read a lot of in my twenties. I will share a quote of his that I love [in the show notes](#).

As for a practical tip, well, Jonathan made the statement--"An entrepreneur is someone who doesn't want to compete with someone else." Which is exactly what personal disruption is. You play where no one else is playing. In what areas of your life, business, career have you figured out how NOT to compete. Other than with your own ignorance.

If you enjoyed this episode or any prior episodes, we hope you will [leave a review on iTunes](#), even if it's only one sentence.

If you aspire to build a great team, check out [Build an A-Team](#) published by Harvard Business Review Press. No, there aren't any quotes from Shakespeare or Wendell Berry, but there are a few from Ben Franklin!

Thank you again to Jonathan Bush for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager and editor Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.